

# ‘I foster kids to help break the cycle of abuse’

—Lauri Burns, 49, Mission Viejo, Calif.



Lauri, in hot pink (and below), with teens she shelters.

my dad had never been loved himself, and that’s why he did what he did. We hadn’t spoken in years, but I started writing him, letting him know I forgave him for what he had done. About four years ago, we finally reconciled. He couldn’t believe I would forgive him—but that’s what helped me heal. Sometimes abuse is unforgivable, but even if kids hate their parents for what happened, they are still connected to them and might love them. I believe that you need to forgive to heal. One of my girls testified against her father in court, and now he’s serving a life sentence for his abuse. It’s hard, but she can love him and speak the truth at the same time.

Sometimes I help families reconnect. One girl wanted nothing to do with her father, a drug addict. I told her that was fine but asked to meet him. I told him, “I’ve been where you’ve been as an addict, and I’ve been where she’s been as a runaway—I’m just taking care of her until you can do it.” That really had an impact on him. When she got married recently, he’d been sober for seven years, and we walked her down the aisle together.

When I heard that most kids who age out of foster homes end up on the streets, I launched the Teen Project. We bought a house where six formerly homeless young women now live, and they attend college free of charge. We also fund outreach programs to provide resources to kids who are on the streets. At home I am still fostering five young women. As for Summer—who used to run a little classroom for the children of my women’s group when she was 8—she’s now a social worker. She wrote in her grad-school application about how those early experiences gave her the passion to help people. In hindsight I realize that by using our family’s pain to help people in need, it set us free.

By outward appearances, I grew up in a nice, upper-middle-class family. But I was abused by my father. My mother stood up for me at first, but she gave up after a while. I don’t know if she was in denial or she just felt power-

less to help me. By age 19, I was living on the streets, selling my body and doing drugs, and I had a daughter, Summer Rae. She went into foster care when she was 3. Soon after that, I hit rock bottom when two men beat me up and left me for dead

by the side of the road. I went to a shelter and told a counselor about the abuse I’d gone through. Letting out that secret saved me by making me face the deeper problems I’d been trying to escape with drugs.

After that, I started therapy I told her I would watch Shannon while she went to rehab. Unofficially, that was the beginning of my foster relationship with young adults. In the 14 years since I got licensed, I’ve taken in more than 30 teens, among them runaways, drug



addicts and prostitutes. They’re the kids nobody else wants. I know how unloved many of them feel, and I can connect with them and help them.

and attended 12-step programs. Within two years I got Summer back. I also started holding meetings for other single moms with a history of addiction. A few years into the meetings, a woman showed up with her 12-year-old, Shannon, saying she had no place to go.

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I’ve learned that many of the teens’ parents are just grown-up abused kids themselves. One day I realized that maybe

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